Top 30 Most Shocking Religious Scandals | Articles on WatchMojo.com

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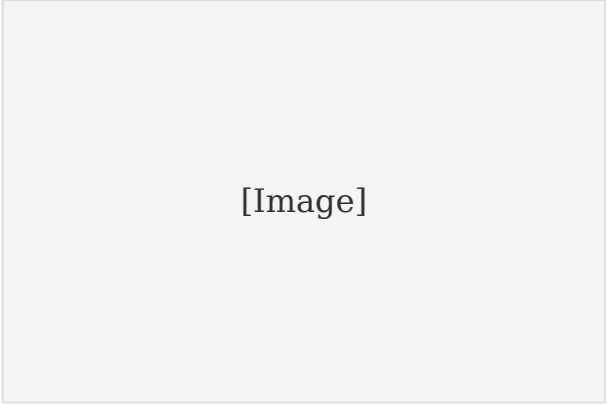

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From financial fraud to sexual misconduct, religious institutions have faced their share of controversies. Join us as we explore the most shocking scandals that have rocked faith communities worldwide. Our countdown includes cases of abuse, corruption, and hypocrisy that have shaken believers and non-believers alike. We'll delve into high-profile cases like the Boston Catholic Church scandal, the Vatican Leaks, and the downfall of televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker. We'll also examine lesser-known but equally disturbing incidents involving religious leaders and institutions across various faiths. Which religious scandal shocks you the most? Let us know in the comments. Which religious scandal do you think is the most shocking? Let us know in the comments.

#30: Ravi Zacharias Posthumous Accusations

It wasn’t until the death of Christian author and minister Ravi Zacharias in 2020 that the true scope of his sexual assault allegations were revealed. This was in addition to the accusations that Zacharias falsified his educational background in his biography. Multiple women claimed the evangelical minister assaulted them while they worked at the Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. Other female employees at his chain of day spas also accused him of sexual harassment. Their

statements included allegations that Zacharias routinely demanded sex from these employees. One accuser even claimed that the spa owner pleasured himself in front of her an astonishing 50 times.

#29: Pastor Carl Lentz Sexual Misconduct Allegations

The very phrase “Celebrity Pastor,” seems oxymoronic, like a pitch for a bad and tasteless reality show. Yet, that was exactly the professional space Carl Lentz occupied during his tenure as a spiritual advisor to entertainers like Justin Bieber. His time in that position didn’t last forever, though, and not because Lentz carried himself with a similar sort of “rock star” swagger. Instead, Lentz was relieved of his membership to Australia's Hillsong Church after it was revealed he’d been unfaithful to his wife. Additionally, his former nanny, Leona Kimes, who was also a wife to another Hillsong pastor, accused Lentz of manipulation and sexual assault during their affair.

#28: Paul Barnes Is Outed

The scandal at the center of Paul Barnes’ ministry isn’t so much connected to the pastor’s identity as a gay man, but rather the reaction to him coming out. The founder of Colorado’s Grace Chapel Church was outed by an anonymous caller to his parish, and the revelation ultimately resulted in him resigning from his position. In a subsequent statement, Barnes stated that he “struggled” with his sexuality, and spent nights “begging God to take this away.” The question can then be asked: will there be a point where all religious institutions accept a broader definition of sexuality, or will certain demographics continue to be ousted from their ranks as a result?

#27: Lonnie Latham Solicitation Scandal

This is another situation with differing viewpoints and reactions, especially with the benefit of hindsight. The Reverend Dr. Lonnie Latham was an influential and active minister within the South Tulsa Baptist Church; a man with opinions about

faith, sexuality and law. Yet, Latham was arrested in 2006 for sexual solicitation of an undercover male police officer. The resulting scandal led to the pastor's resignation from the church. Latham was eventually acquitted of the criminal charges, but various LGBTQIA+ groups pointed out the hypocrisy of him previously defaming gay causes. They argued that if Latham had been free to embrace his true identity while serving his congregation, he might never have resorted to such behavior.

#26: Coy Privette Arrest & Resignation

After his arrest in 2007, critics were quick to point out the hypocrisy of North Carolina lawmaker Coy Privette, who was a staunch opponent of alcohol sales and legalized lotteries. Privette had been picked up for soliciting a sex worker, a case which was discovered by chance while police were investigating a different crime. In addition to being a conservative politician, Privette was also a retired Baptist pastor and the president of the Christian Action League of North Carolina, a position he relinquished after the charges came to light. However, he refused to resign from his role as a Cabarrus County Commissioner, holding on to the position for another three years despite calls from his Republican colleagues to step down.

#25: Tony Alamo & The Alamo Christian Foundation

The life of this religious cult leader took some strange detours. Tony Alamo initially worked in the music industry as a singer and performer before eventually founding the Alamo Christian Foundation in 1969. His Jewish heritage seemed to matter little when it came to the evangelical side of preaching, yet Alamo's foundation was criticized almost immediately for targeting youth in Hollywood for conversion. This focus on having young members of his foundation cruising Hollywood for new recruits tied into Alamo's exploitation of child labor for his clothing side business. In 2009, he was ultimately convicted of charges related to his inappropriate conduct with minors, and spent the rest of his life in prison.

#24: Ted Haggard’s Sex Scandal

The Saint James Church was founded in 2010 by a Free Methodist pastor named Ted Haggard. This wasn’t Haggard’s first venture; he had previously found great success with his New Life Church back in the 1980s. But it was the scandal associated with Haggard’s former ministry that necessitated a new religious venture, one that outed his extramarital affair. The pastor admitted to a relationship with a male sex worker named Mike Jones, as well as to purchasing narcotics. This was especially significant given Haggard’s vocal opposition to same-sex marriage and LGBTQIA+ causes. The minister also admitted that he behaved inappropriately with another young male member of his congregation, and he ultimately resigned from his position as chair.

#23: John Paulk & Gay Conversion Therapy

The fundamentalist Protestant group, Focus on the Family, has long advocated for conservative political causes, with an emphasis on opposing LGBTQ+ rights. They established a splinter ministry called Love Won Out, led by John Paulk, who claimed that counseling and prayer had changed his sexuality. However, Paulk stirred controversy in 2000 when he was photographed outside a gay bar in Washington D.C. He initially denied it was him, then claimed he only stopped to use the restroom, before ultimately admitting he went there to meet other patrons. Paulk eventually left Love Won Out, publicly denounced the organization and apologized for his involvement. These days, he identifies as both Christian and gay, rejecting the “formerly gay” label he once embraced.

#22: Terry Hornbuckle Assault Scandal

The Victory Temple Bible Church of Arlington, Texas only consisted of 15 members when it was founded by Pastor Terry Hornbuckle in 1986. Fast forward to 1992, and the congregation that was formerly housed within an old Dairy Queen had been rebranded as Agape Christian Fellowship, and was situated in a nondescript strip mall. It was during his time overseeing this new ministry that Hornbuckle drugged and sexually assaulted three non-consenting women. He was found guilty in 2006, and served a full 15-year sentence. However, fearing that he would re-

offend if released, authorities decided to transfer Hornbuckle to a mental health hospital after his prison term had ended.

#21: Mother Teresa’s Motivations & Charity Scandal

To many people around the world, Mother Teresa remains an unwavering figure of selflessness and compassion. This is understandable, as the Albanian-Indian nun founded the Missionaries of Charity which, for many years, has provided hospice services and assistance programs for the poor and sick. But even before her death in 1997, Teresa was criticized for her motives and the quality of medical care provided. Her critics cited the Missionaries’ practice of secretly converting dying patients to Christianity regardless of their religious affiliations. She was also called out for reusing syringes and lacking proper medication, even though her charity was pulling in millions of dollars in donations every year. Regardless of these denunciations, Mother Teresa was canonized by the Vatican in 2016.

#20: Joel Osteen & the Hurricane Harvey Controversy

Famous televangelist Joel Osteen has been the senior pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas since 1999. When Hurricane Harvey hit Texas in August 2017, Osteen drew significant criticism for only offering prayers, and not opening his megachurch to those displaced by the flood. Through their social media pages, Lakewood’s administration attempted to refute those claims. They put up pictures that supposedly showed that the 16,000-seat facility had also suffered considerable flooding and was, therefore, inaccessible. But this was quickly contradicted by posts from several Twitter users, which showed no apparent flooding around the church premises. Following the backlash, Osteen made Lakewood available as a shelter and began accepting donations and relief items for the hurricane survivors.

#19: Peter Popoff’s Clairvoyant Scam

The televangelist boom of the 1970s and ‘80s saw a number of high-profile

preachers amass fame and fortune for their apparent healing and clairvoyant powers. One of these was Peter Popoff. During his widely broadcast services, Popoff would accurately provide specific details about his audience members, as if divinely revealed to him. In 1986, James Randi, a magician, and skeptic showed that the California preacher wasn't actually hearing from God, but from his wife through an earpiece. At first, Popoff denied the allegations, but faced with insurmountable evidence, he later owned up to them. While his followership was significantly affected by the scandal, Popoff successfully made a comeback in the late '90s.

#18: Joe Barron Juvenile Solicitation Scandal

Joe Barron was a minister and marriage counselor at Prestonwood Baptist Church in the Dallas, Texas suburb of Plano. In 2008, Barron struck an online conversation with who he thought was a teenage girl living in Bryan, Texas. After about two weeks, Barron drove the almost 200-mile trip to meet up with the "girl," only to be arrested by law enforcement and charged with solicitation of a minor. His arrest was part of a sting operation in which police officers posed online as young children, in a bid to fish out predators in the area. The Prestonwood church quickly denounced Barron's actions and forced him to resign from his pastoral position. He was later convicted of the charges.

#17: Carlton Pearson & the Gospel of Inclusion

At the height of his ministry, Carlton Pearson was a prominent Pentecostal preacher whose Tulsa, Oklahoma church drew in crowds of over 6,000 people weekly. He was also a gospel singer and televangelist who got his start as a protégé of the late Dr. Oral Roberts. As beloved as he was, Pearson soon lost favor with his peers and followers when he adopted a new doctrine he called the Gospel of Inclusion. This doctrine rejected the idea of Hell as punishment for sin and preached that everyone will ultimately be saved by God, regardless of their actions on Earth. Soon after, Pearson lost a bulk of his congregation and he was declared a heretic by the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops.

#16: The Many Scandals of Earl Paulk

During the Civil Rights Movement, Georgia minister Earl Paulk gained a reputation as one of a handful of white Southern preachers who advocated against racism and segregation. However, that reputation was soon tainted by a slew of sex scandals. Between 1992 and 2005, multiple women accused Paulk of manipulating them into having sexual relations with him. But the mother of all scandals came in 2007 when Donnie Earl, Paulk's nephew and a senior pastor at his church, revealed that Paulk was actually his father. Through a court-ordered paternity test, it was discovered that Paulk had had an affair with his brother's wife, resulting in the birth of Donnie Earl. He was also alleged to have molested his granddaughter.

#15: Greater Ministries International Ponzi Scheme

As the founder of the Florida-based Greater Ministries International, Gerald Payne orchestrated an elaborate scam that defrauded unsuspecting people throughout the '90s. Dubbed "Faith Promises," the scheme was depicted as a divine investment program in which investors' money would be doubled by God himself. In total, about 18,000 people were swindled by Payne, his wife, Betty, and other church leaders to the tune of about $500 million. The fraudulent program came to a halt in August 1999 when U.S. federal agents stormed the church's headquarters in Tampa and closed down the building. Payne and his accomplices were arrested and handed lengthy prison sentences for their crimes.

#14: The Book of Abraham

The Book of Abraham is one of the most fundamental scriptural texts of the Church of Mormon. The text originated from a collection of Egyptian scrolls that were bought and translated by the church's founder, Joseph Smith, in the 19th century. Smith claimed that the book was an autobiographical account of Abraham's early life in Egypt. But almost as soon as it was published, the book became shrouded in controversy, with some Egyptologists criticizing Smith's translation of the original text. They also accused him of reconstructing entire parts that had been damaged. The book sparked renewed criticism in the late 1960s when parts of the scrolls

purchased by Smith were discovered and found to be entirely different from his translated text.

#13: Robert Tilton’s “Prosperity Gospel” Scandal

The prosperity gospel is a belief in some Christian denominations that encourage followers to make monetary donations in exchange for God’s favor. This doctrine has been widely criticized by Christian and non-Christian figures and has even resulted in multiple financial scandals. Chief among them was Robert Tilton, a Texas preacher, and televangelist who urged his audience to mail in hefty sums alongside their prayer requests. In 1991, an ABC News investigation into Tilton’s ministry found that he only took out the cash and checks, and threw away the prayer requests. Although Tilton initially denied this, he later owned up to it in a deposition. Tilton quickly lost most of his audience, and eventually, his TV program.

#12: The Magdalene Laundries

In 2014, English actress Judi Dench received an Oscar nomination for her performance in “Philomena.” The film, based on true events, followed a single mother who was sent to work in a church-owned institution and forced to give her child up for adoption. Run by the Catholic Church, the real-life institutions, known as Magdalene Laundries, took in unwed mothers and other women thought to be “morally wayward.” They were then subjected to, in some cases, years of torture and unpaid labor - practices which were supported by the State and Church. In 2013, the government of Ireland offered a formal apology and set up a compensatory fund for victims of the laundries. Catholic Representatives, however, still refuse to acknowledge the church’s part in it.

#11: The Banco Ambrosiano Scandal

In the early ‘80s, a scandal broke involving the Catholic-owned Vatican Bank and another Italian bank called Banco Ambrosiano. In 1981, the chairman of Banco Ambrosiano, Roberto Calvi, was sentenced to four years in prison for illegal transactions he had carried out through the institution. While he was out on bail,

the bank collapsed after it was discovered that it had accrued debts of over $1 billion. Calvi fled the country to England, only to be found dead - hanging from the Blackfriars Bridge in London. Being the main shareholder of Banco Ambrosiano, the Vatican Bank was implicated in the scandal, as it was alleged to be the medium through which a lot of money was siphoned out of the bank.

#10: Jim & Tammy Faye Bakker's Controversies

Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were a husband and wife evangelical team that gained popularity in the mid-70s with their television program "The PTL Club." The Bakkers enjoyed great success with the show, at one point raking in revenues of around $120 million annually. This all came crumbling down after it was revealed that $287,000 in hush money was paid to Jessica Hahn, a church secretary who accused Bakker of assaulting her years ago. Things took a turn for the worse when Jim was charged with defrauding his members of millions of dollars for memberships at Heritage USA, their religious theme park. He was sentenced to 45 years in prison, of which he served only five.

#9: Residential Schools in Canada

The troubling legacies of governmental policies like the Japanese Internment Camps of World War II looms large over Canada's system of residential schools. These state-sponsored institutions possessed ties to religious organizations, and were intended to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children. The schools shockingly operated into the late '90s, with the last of its kind, Kivalliq Hall, only shutting its doors in 1997. The residential school system today has been acknowledged by the Canadian government as genocide, thanks to their forced removal of children, widespread abuse, and the damage done to indigenous cultural heritage. A 2021 investigation even turned up the existence of unmarked graves, offering yet another black eye to this shameful period in Canadian history.

#8; Gilbert Deya Child Abduction & Trafficking

Scandal

After leaving his home country of Kenya in the mid-1990s, this evangelist founded the Gilbert Deya Ministries in the United Kingdom. Deya and his wife, Mary, claimed to be able to grant infertile women “miracle babies” after praying for them. These women were made to travel to Kenya, where the birthing process would take place. It was, however, discovered that these “miracle babies” were actually stolen from maternity hospitals in Nairobi and presented to unsuspecting women. Mary was arrested in Nairobi in 2004 and later sentenced to prison for stealing two babies. Deya was apprehended in the UK, and after a lengthy court battle, he was extradited to Kenya, where he was tried on child trafficking charges but was ultimately acquitted.

#7: Metzitzah B’Peh Scandal

The practice of male circumcision is an ancient rite in Jewish faith, dating back to the religion’s foundation. In certain orthodox communities, after taking off the foreskin, the mohel or circumciser sucks off the blood with his mouth before bandaging the area. This procedure, known as Metzitzah B'peh, came under fire after a number of New York infants were diagnosed with herpes. The disease was thought to be transmitted to the children by the mohel, reportedly leading to the deaths of two babies over an 11-year period. In response, the New York City Health Department passed a regulation mandating that all parents be informed of the risks and sign a consent form before proceeding with the ritual.

#6: Creflo Dollar Gulfstream Jet & Domestic Violence Scandals

Known for his extravagant suits, luxury cars, and lavish homes, Creflo Dollar really goes out of his way to embody his last name. The Atlanta-based televangelist has caused quite a stir for his acceptance and preaching of the prosperity gospel. In 2015, Dollar was heavily criticized for soliciting donations to buy a luxury $60 million Gulfstream private jet. According to him, the plane was necessary to spread the gospel worldwide. Prior to that, in 2012, Dollar was accused of getting physical with his teenage daughter. He was arrested and charged with battery, but the

charges were later dropped after he completed a mandatory anger management course.

#5: Mount Cashel Orphanage Scandal

The Mount Cashel Orphanage was a facility in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada that housed boys from the 1950s until it was shut down in 1990. The orphanage was run by the Congregation of Christian Brothers, some of whose members molested the young residents. In total, over 300 boys were reported to have been victims of the crime, making it the largest assault scandal in Canadian history. Even worse, it was reported that religious and local authorities were well aware of the incidents, but turned a blind eye to them. Multiple civil lawsuits have since been filed by Mount Cashel survivors, leading to millions of dollars in compensation being paid by the Government of Newfoundland and the Congregation of Christian Brothers.

#4: The Allegations Against Bishop Eddie Long

Bishop Eddie Long was the senior pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in DeKalb County, Georgia when he was embroiled in controversy in 2010. That year, four young male members of Long's church came forward with allegations that he had forced them into improper sexual relationships a couple of years prior. Long, who was staunchly anti-gay marriage, vehemently denied the claims, saying that he was "under attack" by his accusers and that he was "going to fight." But that fight only manifested behind closed doors, as the lawsuits filed by the four men were settled out of court for undisclosed sums. A fifth accuser later came forward and also received an unspecified settlement from Long.

#3: Jimmy Swaggart Solicitation Scandal

Jimmy Swaggart was once a pastor at the Assemblies of God pentecostal church, and one of the leading televangelists in the U.S. His weekly programs were so popular that they were broadcast to over 3,000 stations around the world. But what he probably is most remembered for was the scandal he was accused of in 1988. After being photographed leaving a motel room with a sex worker, Swaggart

was stripped of his ministerial license and his TV shows were briefly taken off the air. All of this built up to Swaggart's infamous "I have sinned" speech, in which he tearfully confessed to his congregation on live TV. The Louisiana preacher went on to establish his own independent ministry.

#2: Vatican Leaks Scandal

In 2012, a series of confidential Catholic Church documents were released to the public, in what became known as the Vatican Leaks Scandal. It all began with the publication of a letter written by the then-secretary of the Vatican Finance and Management Committee, alleging misappropriation of funds within the committee. Things worsened when Italian journalist Gianluigi Nuzzi released a book containing more confidential letters from Pope Benedict XVI's desk. These letters exposed alleged financial corruption and abuse of power within the Vatican. The final nail in the coffin was an internal investigation that revealed the blackmail of gay clergymen by Church outsiders. Pope Benedict ultimately resigned from his position in 2013, the first papal resignation in 700 years.

#1: The Catholic Archdiocese of Boston Spotlight Scandal

In the early 2000s, the Boston Globe published a series of articles that revealed accusations of assault by multiple individuals against Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Boston. These articles, which initially focused on cases within the Boston area, soon gave way to a global investigation into the conduct of priests and the leaders of the church. In total, more than a thousand cases were uncovered, with some dating back several decades. Major criticism was directed at the church leaders, who covered up these cases by transferring accused priests to other parishes. The exceptional investigation by the Boston Globe team was dramatized in the 2015 Academy Award-winning film "Spotlight."

Should religious leaders be held to different moral standards than their respective flocks? Let us know what you think, respectfully, in the comments.

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